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ABSTRACT

Following an examination of alternative means of providing evaluation services in the absence of additional resources, the Small Project Assessment Service (SPAS) is described. Two types of cooperative research endeavors had been considered--those involving outside (non-school district) organizations such as universities, and those involving in-house (school district) personnel from offices other than the Office of Research Evaluation (ORE). The SPAS is an example of an operational in-house cooperative research system and was developed by the School District of Philadelphia's ORE. This service is designed to assist directors of small projects (which do not have sufficient funding to fund evaluation services) to assess their own projects. The SPAS makes available to project directors the technical expertise of ORE personnel to help them in their assessment efforts. The SPAS is a process involving the following steps: (1) completion of a Project Outline Form by the project director and forwarding it to ORE for review; (2) a meeting of the project director and ORE to complete the "Project Assessment Plan"; (3) conducting the project assessment and forwarding the data to the ORE auditor; and (4) review by ORE of the implementation of the assessment and certifying its accuracy. (RL)

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NO DESERVING POOR REFUSED:

PROVIDING EVALUATION SERVICES DURING HARD TIMES

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I. INTRODUCTION

Most offices of research and evaluation function or attempt to operate as service organizations. Virtually all such offices also function with limited and often insufficient resources. The lack of relationship between requested services and available resources often results in the necessity to negotiate which services and products and are not available to the clients of research and evaluation offices. The need to balance client service requests due to lack of resources is one of the major problems facing such offices.

The financial problems of school systems, particularly large urban school systems, coupled with double-digit inflation, have created an even more untenable situation. Unfortunately, while school systems are cutting back, areas such as research, evaluation and testing, often erroneously assumed not to have direct bearing on instruction, are targeted for the heaviest share of reductions.

As a youngster growing up in Philadelphia, I remember traveling up Broad Street and often seeing an enormous billboard at the Broad and Olney subway stop. The billboard was an advertisement for an undertaker, and on it was described a number of various funeral arrangements at various prices. At the bottom of the billboard, written in small, but very readable script, was the statement, "No Deserving Poor Refused."

Those of us who have toiled in offices of research and evaluation in school systems may view themselves at times as "deserving poor." Unfortunately, I have yet to hear a superintendent or a school board utter

those words, "No Deserving Poor Refused." Yet, we have been refused on many occasions, particularly when it comes time to negotiate for our budgets.

It is now a fact of life that we must do more with less. Being in California, it might be appropriate to quote your Governor, Jerry Brown. I believe it was Governor Brown who coined the phrase, "the politics of less." Yes, we must play that political game if we are to survive, and I for one, am unwilling to throw my hands up in despair and say, unless we can accrue additional resources, we simply cannot provide <u>any</u> assistance. There <u>are</u> ways to deal with the provision of evaluative services during hard times. The focus of this paper is to examine alternative means of providing such services in school systems in the absence of additional resources.

It is possible, but not practical to attempt to formulate specific responses to each of the specific type of resource-related problems faced by school district offices of research and evaluation. This is due largely to the fact that the problems are neither specific to a single district, nor is each prevalent in all districts. Instead, it would seem to be more appropriate to propose general recommendations. Successful change initiatives within any one of these areas might well help school districts to begin to deal with their specific needs.

The general areas of proposed solutions which will be discussed are:

1. The provision of additional resources for evaluation.
2. The development of greater organizational efficiency within offices of research and evaluation.

3. The development of more effective means of communication between offices of research and evaluation and their clients.

4. The development of cooperative research initiatives.

One of the more promising means of internal cooperative research has been called the Small Project Assessment Service. While this represents but one attempt at dealing with the problem of diminishing resources, I believe that it holds particular promise. Therefore, some special attention will be paid to the Small Project Assessment Service in terms of describing its component parts. Let us now examine various strategies for providing quality evaluation during times of diminished resources. The first such strategy, the provision of additional resources, is a possibility that should be mentioned, though it is an unlikely prospect in the present climate. But that's a topic for another paper.

II. Additional Resources

The most simplistic, yet least likely to achieve solution is that which calls for the provision of additional resources for evaluation. Fiscal stability has not been a characteristic of urban school systems during the past decade, and offices of research and evaluation tend not to be among the top funding priorities of under-funded school districts.

The need for additional funds has been well documented, most recently by Webster and Stufflebeam in their 1978 AERA address, "The State of Theory and Practice in Educational Evaluation in Large Urban School Districts." In 1977, they surveyed the largest urban school districts, and found that the 35 which responded, spent approximately $13 million of

non-categorical (non-federal) funds on evaluation. This total, however, represented a scant fifteen-hundredths of one percent of the districts' general fund educational expenditures. Even with a higher percentage of federal education money being spent for evaluation (1.8 percent), the overall picture is still bleak. (An average of three-tenths of one percent of the total school district budget).

As Webster and Stufflebeam point out, "In the real world of applied evaluation and research, emphasis translates to money.... Evaluation, if implemented adequately, is cost-effective but not cheap." From all indications, however, the provision of additional resources for evaluation, though a viable solution, is unlikely to be achieved. Hence, there are but three areas proposed here which hold a realistic promise of success.

III. Organizational Efficiency

The development of greater organizational efficiency within offices of research and evaluation can be viewed in terms of structure and function. Because overall school district structures vary, it is impossible to prescribe a single, most optimal organizational configuration. Structure should always follow function. Hence, the first step in an assessment of organizational efficiency is to determine the general expectations held by the primary clients, (a list usually headed by the superintendent of schools), and to clearly delineate specific office priorities based upon them.

For example, the goal of an office of research and evaluation might be to provide accurate and timely information for decision-makers at all

levels. The specific priorities of the office might be:

1. To produce information for decision making (e.g. descriptive, comparative, generalizable) about the major instructional priorities of the school system.
2. To provide data and information which will enable the school district to develop more efficient instructional and mangement systems.
3. To develop and present the data and information so that it meets the specific needs of the audiences for which it is intended and so that the information can be used to implement positive change within the system.
4. To provide the technical and non-technical support necessary to shape the process of information gathering and usage.
5. To render service on an on-going basis, so that information on the inputs, processes, and outputs of a project or program are taken into consideration, not merely the product.
6. To design information so that it is clear and meaningful to the audiences to which it is disseminated.

Once the function of the office has been articulated, the existing structure can be examined to determine its appropriateness in meeting the stated priorities.

Merely developing a new structure to meet the priorities of the office will not assure efficiency, however. Each division should be

required to annually develop a series of performance objectives against which its success may be measured. For each objective, information should also be provided concerning (1) the reason for selection, (2) means of demonstrating success, and (3) the resources necessary to reach the objective.

IV. Effective Communications

Research and evaluation findings have little value unless they are disseminated and used. It is essential, therefore, for the responsible office to communicate its results clearly.

Government agencies, central office administrators, principals, teachers, the mass media, and the general public are among those interested in the instructional programs and educational innovations on which offices of research and evaluation report. To meet the audiences' diverse needs, both technical and general publications should be issued.

For example, demographic, school, and enrollment data would be generated and distributed as required by government agencies and the school district. The results and analyses of test scores, instrumental in judgments of pupil successes and needs, would also be disseminated. The mass media might receive test-score breakdowns by grade and by school, which would enable them to inform the public about student progress.

Publications about federally-funded projects, including proposals, annual and interim evaluation reports, and perhaps an updated historical digest, should be distributed to funding agencies and school district priority-area projects through feedback bulletins and assessments. From

these communications, project staffs may learn about successful innovative programs which they, too, can implement.

Perhaps the three areas most pivotal to improving communications are (1) the format and style of the research and evaluation reports, (2) the dissemination of the project results to specific audiences, and (3) providing means of better understanding the city-wide testing program.

V. Cooperative Research and Evaluation Initiatives

Engaging in research and evaluation activities on a cooperative basis provides the potential for greater accomplishment, while reducing the resources to be contributed by any of the participating parties. In addition, it may result in more highly skilled personnel being available for specific tasks, and should almost always serve as a learning experience for everyone involved.

Two types of cooperative research endeavors should be considered -- those involving outside (non-school district) organizations such as universities, and those in which in-house (school district) personnel from offices other than the research and evaluation unit become involved.

Cooperative research with outside organizations is the most common type. Rather than just waiting for it to occur, however, if an office of research and evaluation initiates the arrangement, it will likely be able to solve certain problems while avoiding others.

Since the dissertation is a required hurdle before the doctorate is awarded, students are constrained to "find a topic." At times this process is almost as lengthy as the study undertaken. Too often the topic is merely an academic exercise to fulfill a requirement. This

is not to deny the need for "pure" research, but it seems futile to ask questions unless someone really wants to know the answer.

Graduate students are not the only university personnel with an incentive to engage in research. "Publish or perish" is still a way of life, and competition has become even keener in recent years due to the decreasing number of available tenured positions.

Large urban school districts each serve tens of thousands of children, and it is well-known that the problems of education, particularly those of large city school systems, are legion. More questions are being asked than school systems can afford to retain staff to attempt to answer. Indeed, determining the correct questions to ask is in itself a sufficient challenge.

This suggests that a mutually profitable relationship can be established between the university and the school system. Offices of research and evaluation should assemble listings of broad areas in which information is needed, as well as more specific suggested research topics within each area. A mechanism to solicit cooperative endeavors must also be developed. University professors and doctoral students opting to pursue research in these areas would generate important information for the school district. In turn, they would receive the benefits of the cooperation of the school district and of association with its research personnel.

VI. Small Project Assessment Service

An example of an operational in-house cooperative research system is the Small Project Assessment Service developed by the School District of

Philadelphia's Office of Research Evaluation (ORE). As a service unit, ORE attempts to respond to as many requests for research and evaluation as possible. Unfortunately, it does not have the resources to respond to all requests. The majority of its resources must be committed to legally required evaluations. Still, ORE considers it a responsibility to serve all members of the school district family.

In an attempt to deal with this problem, the Office of Research and Evaluation initiated the Small Project Assessment Service. This service is designed to assist directors of small projects (which do not have sufficient funding to fund evaluation services) to assess their own projects so that they can get some sense of degree of movement toward their objectives. This service makes available to project directors the technical expertise of ORE personnel to help them in their assessment efforts and provdes an end-of-year ORE program review for the purpose of certifying what has occurred.

The Small Project Assessment Service is a four-step process:

Step 1 involves the completion of a Project Outline Form by the project director (coordinator). Once this is forwarded to ORE, it will be reviewed and assigned to a staff member who will study the project description and arrange a meeting with the project director or his designee.

Step 2 involves a meeting at which the "Project Assessment Plan" will be completed. At this meeting, a precise plan of action will be outlined. It is anticipated that in most cases an additional

meeting will not be necessary. The ORE staff member assigned to the project wil handle any necessary consultations with other ORE personnel.

Step 3 asks the Project Director or his designee to conduct the project assessment as outlined in the Project Assessment Plan. Results of this assessment will be forwarded to the ORE auditor in such form and at such time as previously agreed.

Step 4 is a review of the completed assessment effort by the ORE staff member assigned to the project. If the assessment has been implemented properly and as planned, the accuracy of the assessment will be certified by ORE.

The Small Project Assessment Service has specifically used the term "assessment," rather than evaluation to differentiate between the more tightly-controlled evaluative services provided by the Office of Research and Evaluation. Nevertheless, the services provided as a result of the Small Project Assessment Service do, if properly carried out, provide the desirable level of objectivity required for the service to be useful to decision-makers.

As indicated, the first step of the Small Project Assessment Service involves the completion of a project outline form by the project director or coordinator. That project outline form asks the individual to provide seven rather direct and simple pieces of information. First, a short paragraph describing the project is requested. Next, the formal objectives of the project, if any, are stated. It should be noted that when a project director comes to ORE with a project which does not contain measurable objectives and ORE's representative begins to discuss the

importance of objectives, ORE is typically able to convince the project director to think through and articulate the specific objectives for the project.

The third bit of information requested, is what the project is trying to accomplish and ORE asks that the project director simply provide that information in a single sentence. Next, is asked, "Where is the project being implemented, and with what population." (That is, in which schools, at what grade levels, what types of students, etc.) Next, ORE asks for an indication of the tentative implementation schedule for the project. (That is, what will be done, when, where, and by whom). The sixth item of information requested, is what would the project director consider concrete evidence that the project is accomplishing that which the project director wants it to accomplish. And finally, room is provided for additional notes and explanations. All of this information can be easily provided in three pages. Hence, ORE is not requiring a long and tedious proposal to be developed. Furthermore, the information which is requested is information that a project director should have, either in his or her head, or close at hand.

After the project outline form has been completed and forwarded to the Office of Research and Evaluation, it will be reviewed and is assigned to a staff member. The next critical meeting to take place will be between that staff member and the project director. During the course of that meeting, the Project Assessment Plan will be completed. This plan is a joint effort between the Office of Research and Evaluation and the project director, and calls for approximately a dozen easy-to-complete items of information, beginning with the specific questions to be answered.

Here it is critical to note that the Office of Research and Evaluation staff member follows the lead of the project director. ORE is not interested in those questions ORE wishes to pursue, but rather those questions of key interest to the project director. Once the question or questions are enunciated, an explication of the information to be gathered to allow the questions to be answered is noted. Then an indication of how the information will be gathered, who will gather the information, when it will be gathered, is set down. The Office of Research and Evaluation staff member assigned to the project will then provide a simple indication of how to prepare the information for analysis and how to analyzse the information. Finally, how to interpret the findings and an indication of other steps, if any, will be explained to the project director.

It should be noted that in preparing the information for analysis, and in the actual analysis, the information is typically kept very simple. If elementary statistical techniques are required, those techniques are explained in detail to the project director, and if the Office of Research and Evaluation can provide those analysis services by computer, it will so indicate at that time. Finally, a projected date for review of the assessment is scheduled and the Office of Research and Evaluation contact person is indicated.

The project director is then sent on his or her merry way, but with the admonition to always feel free to call if any problems or questions arise during the process.

Ah, yes! One other vital piece of information which ORE provides to the project personnel relates to a suggested assessment report format.

ORE suggests a simple, five-part report consisting of first, the project description; second, the project objectives; third, the assessment questions; fourth, a discussion. In the discussion section the project director is asked to clarify or explain the findings presented in the section dealing with assessment questions and discuss them in terms of anything that has taken place in the project during the assessment period. If the responses in the assessment question section seem clear, then the discussion section will often be quite short. The fifth and final section deals with conclusions and recommendations. This section has three purposes: (1) to bring together all that has been said in the above sections and to give the reader a brief total picture; (2) to give the reader an understanding of the meaning of the findings in terms of thr project and to make clear to the reader exactly what has been learned about the project, and (3) to offer specific suggestions for further study or for changes and improvements in the project.

If all goes well at the projected date of review, the project director will submit the assessment report. This report will then be forwarded to the ORE auditor in the form previously described. The auditor will then review the completed assessment effort in an attempt to make a determination as to whether the assessment has been implemented properly and as planned, and to determine the accuracy of the assessment.

A special form has been developed on which the project assessment review can be reported. That form, again consisting of but four pages, asks seven simple questions. First, under the area of preliminary considerations, the ORE auditor lists any occurrences or conditions which

should be considered when reviewing the report. The next question is "Was all required information gathered as planned?" The auditor might likely make a physical check of the information and list any missing data here. A discussion of any limitations of the data would also be appropriate. Third is asked, "Was the data properly prepared for analysis?" Again, a discussion of any limitations in the preparation would be appropriate. "Was the data analysis correctly performed?" is the fourth consideration. Here the auditor would check the computations and discuss any inaccuracies in the analysis. In addition, an indication of the corrections, if any, should be made here. If the corrections have an impact on the interpretation of the data, it should be so noted and explained. Next, an examination of the interpretations of the data is undertaken by the ORE auditor. The primary question here is, "Do the interpretations follow from the analysis of the data?" In this section, the auditor is required to discuss any objections that he/she might have or inaccuracies which he/she may have found and indicate what he/she feels to be a more adequate interpretation of the data. Of course, there is room for additional considerations such as additional interpretations which the auditor feels are supported by the data. In addition to that, any recommendations which the auditor has for further study of the project might also be appropriate here.

Finally, on the last page of the Project Assessment Review, there are two boxes, each of which provides a certification of the review. Box A indicates that the auditor has examined the assessment of the particular project and, unfortunately, is <u>unable</u> to certify it as complete and accurate due to the conditions noted in the review. Box B indicates that

the auditor has examined the assessment and is able to certify it as complete and as accurate except for any specific conditions that might be noted.

In those instances where certification as to the completeness and accuracy of the project is provided, the project director may use that certification to prove to various clients, including those that might provide funding for the continuation of the project, just how successful the project has been.

IV. Conclusion

The Small Project Assessment Service represents an attempt to extend the services of ORE beyond the limits of its existing resources. It has been designed as a vehicle for helping project directors to gather reliable information upon which they can base decisions.

The Small Project Assessment Service is not without its problems, however. For example, it assumes that others, specifically the project director or his or her designee, will do the work necessary to complete the assessment. If they are unable to, or unwilling to, then of course the service cannot function properly. In addition, the problem related to the ability to specify objectives (referred to earlier) remains key to the provision of useful information.

As has been discussed in this paper, and in those papers preceding it, there is a definite need for alternative means of providing evaluation services during times of limited resources. The Small Project Assessment Service is one of the more promising means of providing such services, because it can be easily implemented, is cost-efficient, can be controlled by the Office of Research and Evaluation, relates to the curriculum, is program-relevant, and is politically useful.